The Nature of God

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GOD

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by

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THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

February 4th—
THE PLACE OF REASON IN RELIGION
Why should we analyze or criticize or compare?
Is one religion as good as another?

* February 11th—
IS THERE A PLACE IN RELIGION FOR THE SUPERNATURAL?
What is the relationship of natural law to religious thought?

February 18th—
CAN WE PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?
What are the traditional arguments?
Is there any value in humanism?

* February 25th—
THE NATURE OF GOD
An attempt to specifically describe the nature of God.

* March 4th—
IS GOD A PERSON?
A consideration of the traditional problems concerning the "personality" of God.

March 11th—
THE INJUSTICE OF GOD

* March 18th—
DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

March 25th—
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GOD

* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

The Psychological Approach to God

What is Religion? There are dozens of definitions. And, of course, you cannot begin to discuss the subject until you have arrived, with your partner, at some accepted meaning of the term. It has been defined in ways that have apparently, and sometimes actually, nothing in common at all. So what one person thinks is religious may be to you the most childish, trivial sort of play-action. Likewise, that which you hold to be religious may be meaningless to him.

● I am going to give you two very general definitions which are the best that I have found. "Religion, at its highest and best, is the devotion of the total self, through search, service and adoration, to the highest cause of which one is now conscious, providing that cause is deemed worthy of the devotion of all men, and is symbolic of even higher unexplored values."*

To bring it down into practical terms, devotion to Germany or Russia or the Empire or the United States may be religious provided you are convinced that that devotion is worthy of the devotion of all men; and that you are giving yourself to it with all that you have; but your country, though it be the end-object of your devotion, at this time, is only an expression of the value which you serve, which value may be incorporated in some other cause at some other time. That's a very severe restriction. You serve a cause as the highest that you know at this moment, and you are convinced that all men in the world should serve that same cause; that they could; and, yet, you are able to withstand the destruction of the highest cause because that which you serve is greater than any particular expression of it. A particular cause is only an expression of God for though that cause be knocked down, the well-spring of the God that you worship is expressing itself in multiple other forms that you or any other man may find.

Another philospher has phrased it this way. "Religion is the theory and practice of the internal life of man insofar as that is dependent upon the entire being of the man, and that which is most permanent in the nature of things." The same qualifications are involved here. It has got to concern the whole

*Weiman, Normative Psychology of Religion. Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1935

man. In religious living the entire personality is involved. There can be no compartments in Religion. Your whole life is engaged, but not merely your whole life over some trivial thing — it is your whole life wrapped around, and in devotion to that which is permanent in the nature of things.

● It is through such seeking and such finding that men discover the meaning in life. I said I would give you a definition of Religion. When I give a definition, I am trying to make clear the meaning of Religion. When you find the meaning of an object or activity you see it in relationship to other objects and activities. You indicate the meaning of a word by showing how that word is related to other words in the language, and through those other words, how this reality that you are describing is related to other realities. To understand any word, object or activity is to know how it is related to other words, objects and activities. The more complete your understanding, the further you can trace these connections. You will recall the poets thought about the flower in the crannied wall. If he could understand that flower really and completely he would understand all things. A little flower will sooner or later tie you into the entire universe. The dull do not see this. It takes a poet to appreciate it, and a scientist and philospher to work it out in its farthest reaches. But each of us can find the extensions of the important things in our life and as we pursue those extensions, find that we are wrapped up in an ever-growing unity. Wherever you start, you will reach everything else, sooner or later, and according to the degree of that unity is the degree of your health. I was going to say the health of the world, but you see the health of the world is given because it's of the nature of things that they should be so intricately and interdependently tied together. Your health, as the health of the nations today, depends upon catching the vision of that interdependency. When a man is religious, he sees himself, his real, complete self, in relationship to every other individual, not merely the ones who live with him in his family, but the men and women who live in the farthest reaches of this planet. Then you have a meaning, a meaning for the Universe, because you have found a meaning for yourself and all other men. And you found the meaning because you found the way in which all things were related.

Now Religion is different from any other field of effort. Religious problem-solving is distinct and unique because it isn't concerned, ever, with any particular, little problem, no

matter how important that problem may be. Religion is always concerned with the universal aspect of things, and with the whole man. You cannot ever isolate a religious problem. Of course that statement requires some qualification, because, as we said last week, when you pray, you take a specific problem that you are concerned with, and bring it into the light of the knowledge of God that you have. Prayer is the way to solve particular problems. But when I say Religion is never concerned with a specific problem only, I mean that you can't solve that one problem without seeing it in relationship to all your other problems and your whole life. And you can't do this unless all your decisions are based on a desire to serve the will of God. And so Religion seeks to bring you into that relationship, with God, to link together the strands of your life, to point out the implications of your life and the possibilities of your salvation.

On this basis religion should be the most important activity of your life. That is why I made the rather striking statement that if religion isn't the most important thing in the world to you, it's nothing but a decoration. You must be terribly serious about it or you might as well discard it altogether. It is too important to play with. I don't mean to say you have got to be perfect at it. God knows none of us are that. If we were, we wouldn't sit in Church, and we wouldn't preach, certainly. As long as you are trying to find this central core of existence, as long as you are seriously inclined toward the task of discovering that which is permanent in the nature of things, you will be justified. You must keep on with it. No man can take that away from you because your Religion is what you are.

No man, I want to say, can be irreligious. No man can be without Religion because no man can possibly exist without a coordination of the things that go to make up his life. Now there will be more or less in some people, and they will be more or less conscious of it, but every man lives in God. To the extent that he is conscious of the presence of God or the growth of connections or goodness in his life he is religious. You use arithmetic, and you use tools. You use language. You use many things that surround your life, but you are religious.

● Whitehead, my favorite philosopher, as you know, has said that a man's character is dependent upon his Religion, upon his faith. That is one of the primary aspects of Religion which no man can escape. Note the way he said that "escape"! A man's character is dependent upon his faith. That's a primary characteristic of Religion which no man can escape. We would

like to think it weren't true. He is saying Religion is what you are. It's the way your life is organized. It is the extent and depth and scope of your understanding and appreciation. Whether you know it or not, that's what you are, and you are as good or as bad as that understanding and that integration.

● On the strength of this assertion it becomes clear that a tremendous effort is needed in the realm of religious faith. Are you very proud of our national character? Are you very proud of the national character, if I may use that term, of any of the nations? Are you proud of your own individual character? I have no pride in mine I know. We have little character because we have little faith. It is because most of us have nothing to tie up to, because we are living on superficial levels; because we are playing around with the furniture of the world and have forgotten the source of what is good. "That which is permanent in the nature of things" the philosopher said. Well, how many of us ever stop to wonder what is permanent in the nature of things? We are not doing it. It isn't being done. But this Nation was formed by men who came over here because they had a sense of something permanent in the nature of things, and nothing of lesser importance meant much to them. Their lives, their work, friends and country were secondary. That which was permanent was what they treasured. Our country was built on such faith — on such character. Now we have lost, in large part, that character because we have lost that faith, because we have been concerned with lesser things. We have been too busy engineering, pushing and squeezing and being successful with too little attention to Religion which says, "Leave the trivial to look after itself. First of all, find for yourself the Kingdom of Heaven, the meaning of God and Man, and then all these other things will be added unto you".

Look at our world. How much direction do you find there? The people who are fighting the war don't see very much — most of them, I think. And I suppose I have said it before, but this Palm Sunday, approaching the tragedy of Jesus, I will say it again, that unless we come out of this war with a sense of the meaning of God and a depth of devotion to Him, it will not have been worth the cost of one life. And yet, one sees little or none of this in evidence. As yet there is only a growing sense of need. We are still playing around with the furniture of the world.

This philosopher, Whitehead, has said that in Man's guest for that which is permanent in the nature of things, he goes

through three stages, and this is the psychological approach to God. First of all, God, the Void. God is a Void to begin with. He means by this that in spite of the integration that is in you, in spite of the God that works in you and upon Whom you are dependent, in spite of the fact that you live and move and have your being in Him, you don't know Him. He is a great Unknown to you. You haven't found the thread of things. You haven't learned how things go together. You have a sorrow here and a joy here. You are successful in one, and you fail in another. You build up love and friendship and somebody tears it down, and it hurts, but then you find another love growing over here. But there is no key to it. You are swamped and bewildered by unrelated events. So you are up and down. Despair at one time, joy another and over all confusion. And you go on living that way because God is a great Void to you.

People are like that first of all because they are blind and insensitive; because they live on an animal level of instinct and because society, today, is too complicated for instinct to be successful. Thus we live like rats in a maze running aimlessly but sometimes, of course, developing sufficient skill to find our way around the maze and reap the rewards of such success. Such people are usually not even disturbed about it. You see they are insensitive. Others go through life with a perpetual feeling of miserableness. I think this attitude characterizes most people. I have no pride, as I said before, in my religious faith or my way of living, but when you see the way in which people are living, the kind of problems they are concerned with, the despairs and cheap, trivial delights that they have, and the general confusion in their lives you are really impressed with the number of people for whom God is simply not there. They go through life on that level of indifference and weary acceptance. Many too sensitive or tender to endure the dreary routine go mad. They go mad because they can't put together in any semblance of meaning the things that are happening to them.

● Well, some people move out of that stage of God, the Void, and then God becomes an Enemy. This is an interesting transition. God, from being the unknown or that which doesn't exist becomes an Enemy. He appears an Enemy when men just catch sight of Him. When they just begin to glimpse Him, when they see this Permanent Thing in the Universe, this Eternal, All-Important, Supremely Worthful, they see It as an Enemy. Why: Because now there is a standard given to them by which they are to be judged. It seems that a lot of things

they have been doing are now going to be condemned in their own mind as evil. They see that they have got to rise from the level on which they are living. They realize that they can't go on deciding particular problems in isolation from each other. They are going to have to learn how to tie them all together. They are going to have to struggle with the problem of life to see what it is that makes it a problem, to see why this is good, why they resent this hurt, why this love is so beautiful and this friendship so tender and so important. Now their eyes are opened, and it is a little painful. You understand that the best of us are so inadequate, and when you put that inadequate best over against the All-Good God, something has got to change, and it can't be God. He is All-Good. It is we who must change but we don't ever want to change because changing is difficult. Even ruts that are uncomfortable are preferred to the new and unfamiliar. We are willing to pay almost any price to avoid the pain of growth. It is at this difficult point of growth when God appears as an Enemy that a most difficult choice presents itself. It is the same old problem we have mentioned so often. Shall we proceed on the path of growth and hard fact or illusion and fancy?

● Most of us decide not to face the facts. Let's make it all a pretty picture. Let's make religion something that's comfortable. It is nice to sleep in Church. And so we go about creating the kind of God we want, a god who does not impose uncomfortable demands. The safest way to do this is to make God as we want Him in our own image. In this way religion becomes a pleasant social custom of ritual, music, palm leaves and parades like Jesus had on the way to the City. We parade until we see a dangerous issue involved and then we cover it up with more parade and show. We walk away from the facts.

There is another kind of approach, however, which says, "No! There is no point in fooling myself. What are the facts? What are the facts. Let the experiment be made. We will find out for ourselves. If this is God and such His will then certainly intelligent sincere people will not turn away from it." When a man takes that course, he moves on to the third stage. From God the Void to God the Enemy to God the Companion.

This is no mystic we are quoting but a world famous philosopher and mathematician. He said that for those with courage to move forward God the Enemy became God the Companion. When you struggle through the darkness you begin to catch a sense of life and to discover that it has meaning. No matter

how low the plane on which he is living a man may still have high religion. If he is finding down there the things that tie his life together, the Eternal in the nature of things, he has got hold of the Source of Power, and he will grow with it. He will rise from one plane to another.

At this stage one finds that while his problems are harder to solve because he has more to consider, he has infinitely more to work with. Not only has he the source of power but a standard of judgment and principle that is the same for every occasion. Perhaps this is the source of his power for when you have a persistant principle, events which were individual and chaotic begin to take form, to grow together into unity and harmony. When this takes place within the organism or between organisms you have a state of good health for you are living in conformity with the nature of the universe — that is to say in creative harmony with the source of all goodness which is God. When something intrudes as a threat to this growth of organic unity you find out whether it is because of your wrong attitude or the nature of the event itself and on this understanding you act to achieve the maximum growth. And the more you grow in grace and in goodness and stature, and in favor with God, the more you will grow in favor with your fellow-men because everything you do is designed to find the ties that bind you. Now you have got support from the events around you and no longer chaos. I don't mean to say that there will be no wars and troubles and confusions, but you will see them for what they are. And because you are rooted in something below and above and beyond them, you will not be destroyed by those confusions. You will see why they came, and what must be done. The principle you have got hold of will guide you through it all.

You know that every religious saint has been characterized by personal triumph even in the midst of apparent defeat. No matter what happens to or about such a man his is the victory. Well, what is that Victory? Not his own personal success, but the fact that his house is built upon a rock. Thus even in the midst of tremendous concern for the pain of others, and utter defeat of his personal plans and hopes because he lives wrapped in the goodness of God, obedient to His Will. The real defeat and pain comes only when men turn away from this Goodness. He who has found it will go to his death like Jesus, triumphant.

● Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the creator of all that is good fainteth not neither is weary. He giveth power to the faint and to him that hath no

might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon God shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall even walk the heavy walk of a world that is like ours, and they shall not faint!